10

Marshall Islanders' Experiences in World War II

John Heine

I recall the war vividly, although I was very young, a small child of barely nine years. One day stands out most in my mind. That was when I first saw and believed that the war would be a danger to all of us. All I knew about war was what I had learned from Japanese comics about how they were killing Chinese in Manchuria. But this time I was under the guns of American planes. It was early morning of 4 February. I was sitting outside my parents' house under a coconut tree trying to remember the beatitudes from the Bible in preparation for my Sunday school class when suddenly I heard the guns overhead. I saw two planes diving straight at the end of our island, Jabwot. That was the beginning of World War II in the Marshalls. About one hundred Marshallese people died in that bombing. One Japanese was killed, not from a bullet, but when he bumped into a coconut tree while running away.

After that we didn't see any more war for some time. We heard of it, but there was quiet as long as the Americans stopped coming to the island. We did know that the war started with the bombing of Pearl Harbor. As small children in the Japanese school, we had been asked to walk around the island with tiny flags and do some banzais. We didn't know why. All we knew was that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. Why it happened, we didn't know. And then, suddenly, we heard that Tarawa had fallen and we began to see American planes all over the place, dropping bombs everywhere.

One afternoon as I was working with my father, we saw Japanese coming out of the bush. There were about ten of them, and they ordered my father to go with them, and I followed. We went to our house and there the Japanese started going through my father's belongings. In his old chest they found a typewriter and a red fishing line. So they started fumbling around with the typewriter. They were curious, wondering what it was, because these soldiers were not high rank and probably had never seen a typewriter before. After they did all this examination with my father's typewriter and his fishing line, they said, "Come with us," and they took my father. That was the last I saw of him for three months.

A few weeks later I saw the Japanese barge approaching our island again. This time the Japanese were accompanied by a Marshallese man who was their interpreter. They came straight to our house and ordered my mother to follow them. That was the last I saw of my mother for a month or so. Then one night, near dawn, I was awakened by the touch of a sharp object on my head. They took me to the barge and dumped me in. I landed on some guys underneath. They were elderly men who were captured by Japanese to be used at forced labor. I imagined I was one of them when they took us. Where we were going we didn't know because it was dark. Then the barge stopped. When I came out of the hole I saw an island like a picture I'd never seen before of a lot of coconut trees without fronds, their stumps sticking out of the ground and big concrete buildings crumbling down. I saw some airplanes broken on the field. This was going to be our home for the next two months.

I was one of the laborers. There were twenty-nine of us. With these four men I had to stay in a place spending fourteen hours a day after ten-hour shifts, but I had the pleasure of visiting my parents. Another thing I remember is when I found myself able to run away. I guess I had to run because the Japanese were thinking of killing me. I got out of this hole and this air-raid shelter where they were keeping us imprisoned, and I ran as far and as fast as I could. I found myself standing by the edge of the water. The only thing that got into my mind was to jump and start swimming because I heard bullets going over my head. I swam for about four miles. When I arrived at another island, I saw three other Marshallese. They were my companions in the prison. They had escaped a couple of hours ahead of me. So will you join us, they asked. We stole a Japanese canoe and we paddled to the next island. We had to cross three different channels. Now, if you know what *channel* means in the islands, it means you had to swim against about a five-to-ten-miles-per-hour speed of water. So two guys were on this canoe paddling, and two were swimming alongside, because the canoe was not big enough to take all of us. But we made it anyway and then we split up. I didn't want to accompany them because I was afraid if they caught one of us, he might report the other. I knew if they caught me I might report on them. So we split up, we broke up our canoe and let it drift away, and then I went my way.

Whatever happened to those three guys I didn't know until the end of the war. I found two of them still alive. But anyway, that was the beginning of my life for eleven months. For these eleven months I was hiding in the bush. And of course, being on flat land, not a beautiful mountain island where you have big trees, big boulders, caves to hide, it was very difficult to hide. But for some reason the Japanese were not smart enough, they didn't catch me.

I was hiding for eleven months until one day I saw an American LCI [landing craft, infantry] coming back to one of my islands where I was staying alone. I decided to swim to this ship, and sure enough I found five Marshallese scouts on board along with two Marines and navy people. They gladly picked me up and transported me to another island. I couldn't believe when I heard Marshallese being spoken on board. Because to me the war was not yet over. Where in the world was this Marshallese language coming from? It was quite strange. I didn't know that Kwajalein had already been secured, and that Majuro was secured. All I knew was that we were still at war in Jabwot. I did not even know that my brother, Dwight Heine, was on the other ship trying to pick up any Marshallese that they could repatriate from among the Japanese, or at least evacuate to the American side.

To make the story short, I got to Arno and spent ten days there. I volunteered to join the Scout Force. They took me to Majuro and trained me in some very strange ways. And did I enjoy it. Indeed I enjoyed it because I thought I was going back to do something about the Japanese in Jabwot. Well, the training hadn't lasted long before I was asked to go back to Jabwot. This time I was going back with hand grenades and Tommy guns, ready to shoot. Instead, we found twenty-seven Marshallese on our way, right by the island next to where I had been hiding. So we picked them up and waited for night so we could go shore. That was our order, "You catch the commanding officer." But late in the evening we didn't see the message to proceed to Mili Island where about twenty Japanese had surrendered, showing a white flag over the island. So we proceeded that evening and we picked up the Japanese officer and turned back to Majuro. Later, after my second trip, my brother, who thought I was quite radical in using the guns, dumped me from that program.

At the end of the war I was too old to get into school. The school system couldn't accept anyone of my age, so I went to see the principal of our school on Ebon. I asked him, "Can you please set up a program for old juveniles like us?" This man was good enough to set up a small program and put us in the back of the classroom. Because we were not young enough to be called fifth grade, he called us the "back table" because our table was in the back.

We studied. Two years later I went to Majuro looking for a job but ended up in another school system where they were teaching us how to teach young kids. So I spent six months in that school, but then they pulled me out and made me a storekeeper for the school. After two years they made me graduate and gave me a diploma, which qualified me as a teacher.

I thought I was ready to teach, but discovered that I wasn't. So I went to Kwajalein and got a job with the US Navy and learned to speak English. When I had been picked up while I was swimming I could not answer any of

the English words spoken to me. I didn't speak one word of English. So I worked for the US Navy on Kwajalein for five years and then from there I proceeded to the Philippines on my own and was fortunate enough to get into a school there, a place called Solomon University. Without passes from high school it was not an easy task. In 1959 my brother became the first Marshallese graduate of the University of Hawaii. In 1957 I became the first Marshallese graduate from Solomon University in the Philippines.

Maybe I will add a word about my brother, why he did not graduate in 1957 or before me. Perhaps you remember the testing of the atomic bomb in Bikini. Well, he spoke out, not really against the testing of the bomb, but he spoke and asked the United States to guarantee our life, the safety of our lives before any such test could be conducted. For that reason, and perhaps other reasons that I don't know, his scholarship just disappeared. He did not get back to school again until I had graduated from Solomon Unviersity in the Philippines.

It's not easy to pick out the experiences that are most important in one's life. I can't speak for the entire population of the Marshall Islands, but at least many of my age are by-products of the Pacific War--a conflict that we were not part of. We had no business in it; but we were drawn into it. As a result it is not easy for any of us in the islands to predict our futures. We started out with the German government. They trained a bunch of us, giving us enough tools to learn what to do, what they expect of us, and how to build our country. Then out went the Germans, and in came the Japanese. Those who were qualified to lead our country were no longer available, a new bunch had to be trained under the Japanese. And then when we were about to get on our feet and begin to think for ourselves, out go the Japanese. Then here come the Americans. And those leaders of the Japanese era were out, and a new bunch had to be trained.

The question someone raised here yesterday is, "Who's next?" Well, perhaps that question is too late for the Marshall Islands, because we have our own government now. We have what we call the Republic of the Marshall Islands. But then when you examine that republic, and you think about how that republic was led into being what it is through the training of three different administrations, is that a republic, a product of our own desires, of our own making? Well, I will not pretend to have the answer to that question. All I'm saying is that our government today is spending gifts from the United States of $1.5 million dollars through our Compact of Free Association. Much of that money is designated into what we call CIP, capital improvement projects. But once that money is turned into nails and cement, airfields, and trucks, and none of it is invested by the time the fifteen years are up, what then? Again, I don't think I'm qualified to answer that question. But when

you try to separate our future and what we are today from what we were then, when other people were doing our thinking for us, you begin to wonder if that is exactly the type of government that we want. Perhaps it is, I don't know the answer.

I remember not too long ago when I was in the Philippines and also when I was in the United States traveling, people always introduced me as Mr Heine from the Marshall Islands. And then after the end of our talk people would ask, "Where?" And I would say, "Marshall Islands." "Where is that?" And I answered, "Micronesia." "What's that?" I had a difficult time trying to tell them where I am from, unless I said, "You know Bikini?" Then they would say, "You mean, you are talking about that little thing?" I said, "No, I'm talking about that bigger thing." Then I said, "You remember the atomic bomb test?" "Oh, so you are from there? You mean you still have people living there?" I said, "Look at me, I'm alive."

Now if people are trying to govern someone far away and trying to build the future of people far away not knowing where we are (I'm talking about the Germans and about the Americans), would they know where they want to take us to? I think it is a very important question to be answered from our own inner soul.

I have a cousin who wrote a book, *Micronesia at the Crossroads*. His name is Carl Heine. He also went through this school (University of Hawaii). In that book he was talking about the crossroads. He became our first author. Whatever he said in that book, being the first author in my family, I'm really happy that he produced something that somebody can read.

There is another thing that people don't quite understand. I was invited in Baltimore, Maryland, to speak in a Methodist church. My name was plastered all over the church bulletin that Mr Heine from the Marshall Islands, the missionary, is coming to talk to us. And of course the church was filled because they misunderstood my name. They thought Heine was someone from Germany and they wanted to come to hear the report on the money they had been spending on our small church. But they were kind of disappointed when they discovered that I was a native from a tiny island. So let me explain to you why I'm Heine and why my parents suffered during the war. If I was Heine from Germany, then why should the Japanese go after my parents? Well, actually, Heine is the name from Germany and we were from there sometime way back. But the Japanese were more concerned about my middle name, Russell, it's from England. My great-great-grandfather migrated to England, married a Britisher, and then went to Australia and married an Australian. Then two generations later my grandfather came to the island and married a native. So here I am, a mixed-up *halohalo*. Again, a by-product of foreign countries.

I can go on and name you numbers of experiences from numbers of people who were actually shot, who were actually killed, who were actually beheaded in front of my eyes. War is a horrible thing to happen to anyone. It's even more horrible when you don't understand the meaning of it. I don't believe any nine-year-old kid can interpret the meanings of war. To the Marshallese, when we compare our age to the age of the United States and other countries, we are just infants, and it's very difficult for us to interpret the meaning of that war and relate it to our present experience. But we do know that we were tangled by it, that we were hit by it.

Stories are being told over and over and over about what the war was. I repeatedly told my family. Perhaps now I am beginning to regret that I've been telling them that kind of story about the war, because I have a son who is in the US Marine Corps. I have a cousin, Carl Heine's brother, who has been out of the army serving in Vietnam. I have a nephew, here in Honolulu, in the army, and I have two grandchildren that have just been qualified last month to be in the army and the navy. So I don't know, I must have planted some kind of seed for revenge. That's why I feel kind of sorry about my stories. Maybe I shouldn't have talked to you and told you these kinds of stories. Because whoever we are, whether we believe in God or not, or a Supreme Being, there is always that little voice of danger in one's mind. Thank you.

Appendix: Audience Questions and Answers

JH John Heine
RF Robert Franco
LM Leonard Mason
AP Antonio Palomo

LM The Marshall Islands is an area that I have worked with for over forty years. I know very much what John Heine has been talking about because I heard stories like that in 1946 when I was first out there. But I think there's something that John referred to only briefly that needs some emphasis, because it's part of the war story and yet it's not. In 1946 the US military began the atomic tests at Bikini and later at Enewetak. The communities that were relocated from those areas to other islands in the Marshalls had hardships of various kinds in making adjustments. Then in 1954 the first hydrogen bomb was exploded at Bikini. I'm sure you've all heard of the radioactive cloud that blew over Rongelap to the east and that exposed those

people. At least one has died and many have been in the hospital because of some of the effects of that. There are those kinds of difficulties that people are still experiencing in the Marshalls that come out of the war. If the Americans had not gone into the Marshalls as they did, they probably would not have selected Bikini and Enewetak for tests as soon as the war was over.

There is still another side effect of this that is disturbing the culture greatly. It concerns the payment of money to these disturbed populations. We've introduced a kind of money economy to some of the populations to the point where they are really almost welfare people, like Bikini, Enewetak, and Rongelap. Then we took over Kwajalein and developed a missile-testing site which is now intended to be part of the Star Wars program. The United States is paying some $8 to $10 million a year to the Kwajalein landowners for the lease of that land. Distribution of that money has created untold problems because land is very important to the Marshallese, and when you get money for your land, how do you divide it up? By the traditional system? It's into the courts. And I just say now that John Heine, as a trial attorney in the Marshalls, is right in the middle of that kind of result from World War II, and we shouldn't lose sight of that. What the future holds is even more complicated because of some of these events that arose out of the war. Thank you.

AP I'd like to pose this question to John. You've mentioned two things. One was that you decided to attend college in the Philippines and the other had to do with your brother Dwight who had a scholarship to go to college, yet for some reason it was denied him. Do you know why? Why did you decide to go to the Philippines? You could have come here, you could have gone to the states, you could have gone to other places.

JH I guess my brother was fortunate enough to receive a scholarship from the United States Navy. That's why he came to this school. I was working for the United States Navy as well, but I did not receive any scholarship. But I did receive free transportation to the Philippines. . . . Because my brother appeared in the United Nations and spoke against the tests of the bomb the scholarship was withdrawn. Then later on he continued his education through the John Hay Whitney Foundation of New York.

LM I can add just a footnote to that, which might clarify things from my understanding. I know Dwight quite well. Dwight was one of the first Marshallese to become a public figure in the Marshalls under the American administration. At one point, after he'd been to college here for a couple of years and then had gone back and was working in the education program there, he was invited to New York to the Trusteeship Council meeting. At

that time they were considering a motion (this was before 1958) to terminate tests in the Marshalls. And he spoke in favor of that motion. He had not gotten authority from the high commissioner of the Trust Territory to make that trip. He also made speeches on the mainland on his way back, under private sponsorship. When he got back to the Marshalls his job was taken away from him and the scholarship which he had been promised lapsed. There were several people here in Hawai'i, in the education department, who knew him quite well, who spoke in his favor in high places in Washington, and Dwight Heine's name was finally cleared. Another high commissioner had come in and made another decision. But I think that's partly what explains the retraction of his scholarship.

RF Has Marshallese enlistment in the US military increased a great deal in recent years or has it been steady since the war?

JH I thought two years ago Marshallese would get out of the Marshall Islands, find the opportunity outside the Marshalls to enlist. They did enlist outside, but right now there is an active program of recruiting inside the Marshall Islands itself. Since the signing of the Compact of Free Association there are few benefits that have been afforded to us in the Marshalls, and serving in the United States armed forces is one of the benefits made available to our young people. A lot of kids are taking the test, and it amazes me that over 60 percent are passing. Somehow we thought that it would not be that high. We all made a mistake, we thought maybe under 50 percent would pass. But it's over 50 percent of the kids passing, including girls. That's another thing that amazes me because women in our history have always been in the background, although they are the backbone of our country because we inherit our rights to the land through our mothers, through the female line. The women were expected to stay in the background, but today we are having numbers of girls signing up, taking the test, and passing the test. So something is going on, maybe that's another result of the war.

RF The Marshallese and the other Compact states in Micronesia can voluntarily enlist but may not be drafted. Is that correct?

JH Yes, they are not drafted. They are voluntarily enlisted. We have regular visits by army recruiters.

Q There are economic benefits regarding military establishments, and Marshallese are finding opportunities through the American military for some advancement as well. But do you find that at all ambiguous? Do you

find that being inside the American military has an advantage? It gives you a leverage, perhaps, on the future of the Marshall Islands? Or is it also a danger? Or both? Because, of course, the Kwajalein military testing range will be a nuclear target.

JH I think you are quite right that there is danger in what we are doing right now. But I guess the dangerous part of what's happening now is not that strong in our minds because we are economically so poor. We have no economic base besides our coconuts, which is only about eight cents a pound, nine cents a pound, sometimes it's down to two cents a pound. So, in the absence of an economic base, we see that because of the Kwajalein testing ground we cannot really say no to the United States. While the taking is good, we are using it. And, speaking of leverage, yes, there is that leverage. I attended one of the prenegotiation meetings before the signing of the Compact when one of our delegates told some big man from the Department of Defense, "Well, if you cannot accept our price in Kwajalein, there are others who want to pay." This man quickly pounded the table and got up and said, "Let's have a break for a while." So we had a coffee break for about five minutes. Whatever took place after that, I don't know whether there was a telephone call somewhere, but then we found the (payment) clause in our compact was a little bit jacked up. So, I mean, we can sense that we have some chips in our hand right now. But for how long, we don't know. If new places are selected, or if the atomic bomb becomes obsolete, then what? We have that question in our mind too. And believe me, our islands are not growing any bigger. Our population has grown from barely ten thousand after the war to forty-two thousand and we're still on the go. So I don't know when that will stop, the spiraling of our needs with the rising of our population, but something is bound to happen somewhere.